

MEDA meets MAP in the Bitterroot

By Cinda Holt
Business Development Specialist

The Montana Economic Developers Association (MEDA) convened its annual spring meeting May 8-10 in the Bitterroot Valley. Ravalli County Economic Development Authority was a host for the meeting and arts-driven economic development was front and center.

The Montana Arts Council's Montana Artrepreneur Program was featured in presentations and in exhibitions. It was a highlight to see a beautifully designed exhibition of artwork among the various economic development exhibits.

Six of MAC's Artrepreneur Coaches coordinated the exhibits and were on hand to talk with economic developers about the business of art.

Kris Komar, Flori Engebrecht, Sheri Jarvis, Jan Shanahan and Meagan and Michael Blessing all brought artwork from MAP cohorts that are operating in their regions of the state (Flathead Valley, Bitterroot Valley, the Four Corners area west of Bozeman, and Butte/Anaconda).

The MAP exhibition not only showcased artwork, but also presented key economic

development indicators to help economic developers see what arts-driven economic development can look like.

MEDA participants were treated to a series of field trips to unique businesses in the valley. Rocky Mountain Laboratories, Glaxo-SmithKline, Huls Dairy, Bitterroot Tool and Machine and Montana Suri Alpacas Ranch each offered tours of their headquarters.

Shelly Peters, who owns Montana Suri Alpacas Ranch with her husband Richard, is also a member of the Bitterroot cohort of MAP artists. Their artisan business, Alpaca Hill Design, features hand-felted and hand-woven apparel made of alpaca fiber from their fifty-plus Suri Alpacas.

The Montana Arts Council's MAP program is indeed generating impressive economic development. This isn't in the form of a "full-time employee," but in the equally important form of significantly increasing sales for an artist's annual bottom line.

Regional economic developers are encouraged to consider bringing the MAP program to their area of the state. Contact program director Cindy Kittredge at 406-478-4078 or mtcreativearts@gmail.com.



Arts-driven economic development

After completing the MAP program, a Pintler artist's gross income from art sales doubled from 2011 to 2012, and her commissioned artwork sales has increased by 200%. She is featured in four regional galleries and was invited to show in the Best of the Northwest Show in Seattle.

After her enrollment in MAP, a Victor artist saw her business operate at a profit in one year, with her wholesale sales tripling in 2012 and her weaving kits finding placement in 50 retail outlets across the U.S.

Bitterroot artists reported average sales of \$4,000 per artist after completion of MAP, at minimum a 35% increase over previous sales. Of the 2013 cohorts, 80% of the artists have seen at least a 50% increase in sales from last year to present.

In the Gallatin area, 50% of the 2012 MAP artists experienced a 24% average increase in out-of-state gallery representation, meaning more out-of-state dollars flowing into Montana; 40% of these artists have rented new studio facilities.



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MEDA members check out the retail store at Alpaca Hill Design east of Corvallis in the Bitterroot Valley.



MAP coaches who prepared the exhibition at the MEDA conference were: front row (left-to-right): Kris Komar, Flori Engebrecht and Sheri Jarvis; and back row: Jan Shanahan, MAP Director Cindy Kittredge, and Meagan and Michael Blessing.



Richard Peters talks to MEDA members about their Alpacas (left); Shelly Peters demonstrates a machine that begins the refining process to turn the Alpaca hair into yarn (above); the finished product (right); and the retail store at Alpaca Hill Design (below).



Photos by Cinda Holt